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ABSTRACT

These narrative accounts follow a group of young adults searching for meaning during the ten years after their college graduation, and offer insights into how higher education might create conditions for this search to occur during college. This longitudinal study is based on interviews with 39 participants at various points during their undergraduate, graduate, and/or early working years for a 13-year period beginning in 1986 when they entered college. All participants were traditional-age students attending state institutions with a liberal arts focus. The primary focus of the college phase of the study was on epistemology, or students' assumptions about the limits, certainty, and criteria for knowing. Phase 2 of the research explored development after college. Sections of the paper examine the implications for educational practice of holistic education and the developmental dimensions of the search for meaning. Interview data inform discussions of complexities encountered in the search for meaning; realization of the need to search for meaning; construction of internal authority and meaning; and solidifying internal meaning-making. Interview responses were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. A final section discusses the creation of educational contexts for internal meaning-making. (Contains 21 references.) (CH)

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The Search for Meaning in Young Adulthood:

Implications for Educational Practice

Paper presented at the

Association for the Study of Higher Education

San Antonio, TX, November 1999

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held in San Antonio, Texas, November 18-21, 1999. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

The Search for Meaning in Young Adulthood:

Implications for Educational Practice

Holistic education is emerging as a theme in contemporary thinking about higher education for the 21st century. The complexity of contemporary society demands that an educated person be not only cognitively complex, but also complex in one's sense of self and relationships to others. For example, Levine and Cureton (1998) recommend that today's undergraduates need to be skilled at critical thinking to make hard decisions in the face of extensive information, continuous independent learning as information changes quickly, and creativity as understandings of the past become outdated. Making hard decisions and appreciating differences can only be acted upon when one's source of meaning is not dependent on others' opinions. Levine and Cureton also specify appreciation of differences as a major element of education as diversity and change are becoming the norm. Although these characteristics require cognitive complexity, they also require a coherent sense of identity that is free of the need for others' approval (Kegan, 1994). This integration is clear in the Student Learning Imperative's [SLI] (1994) hallmarks of an educated person. The SLI specifies these hallmarks: cognitive complexity, appreciation of differences, a coherent sense of identity, the ability to apply knowledge to practical problems, and decision-making and conflict resolution skills.

Some scholars speak to this complexity as the search for meaning. Willimon and Naylor (1995) write that a college education should "provide a conceptual framework and a process to facilitate the search for meaning that attempts to integrate the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physiological dimensions of life, … encourag[ing] students … to formulate a *personal strategy* to address the most important quest human beings

face – the need for their lives to have enduring meaning" (p. 130, italics in original). This paper recounts stories of a group of young adults searching for meaning during the ten years after their college graduation. Their narratives indicate that the search did not occur for them in college, but instead took most of their 20s. Their stories also confirm that adult life required more of them than cognitive complexity. Most importantly, most participants concluded that they could not find meaning exclusively through the expectations of external others but rather had to develop their internal belief systems in the context of, but not consumed by, external expectations. Their stories, emerging from annual interviews, offer insight into how higher education could create the conditions for this search to occur during college. This paper describes possible forms the search for meaning can take from a longitudinal study of young adult development, and translates the dynamics of those forms to implications for higher education.

Developmental Dimensions of the Search for Meaning

The longitudinal study upon which this paper is based is situated in a constructive-developmental theoretical perspective. This perspective views people as active constructors of meaning via their organizing and interpreting of their experience. It also views these constructions as evolving in the context of increasingly complex assumptions about how to construct meaning (Kegan, 1982). The primary focus of the college phase of the study was on epistemology, or students' assumptions about the limits, certainty and criteria for knowing. Piaget's (1932) characterization of thought as sets of assumptions used to make meaning of experience and Kitchener's (1983) labeling such assumptions epistemic cognition when they relate to knowledge form the foundation for the epistemological dimension of the study. Perry's (1970) and Belenky, Clinchy,

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Goldberger and Tarule's (1986) studies of college students' intellectual development informed the study; however, I approached it inductively to allow new versions of meaning-making to emerge.

As the study progressed, participants indicated that their constructions of themselves (intrapersonal development) and their relationships with others (interpersonal development) were intertwined with their epistemological development. Thus I added Kegan's (1994) theory of self-evolution to inform my interpretations of the stories, yet I maintained my inductive approach to allow the stories to take center stage in the interpretation. Doing so revealed that all three dimensions – epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal – were intertwined in the search for meaning. Following these young adults for thirteen years has convinced me that there is no single developmental story that evokes understanding of the participants' search for meaning. Instead multiple stories convey the varied pathways this search can take. Thus I attempt to identify multiple pathways as they emerge from the stories and offer them as possibility rather than an essential description of young adult's search for meaning. Details about this mode of inquiry of this study are located in the methodological appendix.

Because this paper focuses on the search for inner meaning that transpired largely after college, a description of participants' development at the close of the college experience is a necessary prerequisite. Most participants (80%) were transitional knowers

as seniors[1]. Transitional knowing is characterized by assuming that some areas of knowledge are certain – usually areas such as math, science or religion – whereas others are uncertain – such as philosophy or the humanities. In areas viewed as uncertain, transitional knowers participate in the search for truth, believing that the search will eventually result in greater certainty. A few seniors (16%) were independent knowers, reflecting the assumption that most knowledge is uncertain, everyone has their own opinions, and one decides independently what to believe. Although independent knowers have abandoned the notion of absolute truth and certainty, they have yet to adopt criteria with which to weigh judgments. Only two seniors had assumptions about knowledge as contextual and knowledge claims determined via evaluation of relevant evidence, both characteristics of contextual knowing.

As seniors, most participants had plans for their futures. The transitional knowers were either acting out plans they had believed were "right" for some time or were carefully implementing plans they believed would produce success. The independent knowers were more spontaneous due to their assumption that things would work out or they would simply change course. The two contextual knowers believed they had evaluated all the evidence and made the best decision based on that evidence. Thus as graduates made decisions about careers, relationships, and advanced education, they were acting intentionally to insure their future success.

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[1] For a detailed discussion of the participants' college experience see Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1992). Knowing and reasoning in college: gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The basis upon which graduates made these decisions, however, was largely external influences (Baxter Magolda 1998, 1999). Job decisions were often made based on financial security and opportunity for promotion with less consideration for whether the work was congruent with one's values, beliefs, and preferences for interactions with people. Relationship decisions, particularly marriage, was often regarded as a natural next step rather than a complex choice based on the compatibility of two people's needs and aspirations. Decisions to enroll in advanced education were often perceived as necessary for success or as an alternative to less-than-positive employment options. Thus while participants took these decisions seriously and tried to make them carefully, they tended to rely on external processes for success rather than consider how these choices related to their internal values and beliefs. They assumed that meaning would come naturally from following these external formulas for success, which they often regarded as their own internal formulas. Yet the personal strategies that Willimon and Naylor (1995) call for were rare. Embarking on these external plans for success did not yield meaning; instead it initiated the search for meaning.

Complexities of the Search for Meaning

Despite their expectations, meaning did not come naturally for these young adults. Success in the form of desirable employment, advanced education and relationship came to many as they left college, yet a general dissatisfaction arose in the early years after college. Work, even when they were successful at it, left some participants feeling unfulfilled and wondering if there was something more they could contribute. Graduate and professional school programs were sometimes less interesting than expected. Significant relationships, some of which were marriages, were not as blissful as

participants hoped they would be. These experiences led participants to ask themselves "Is this all there is?" or "Why am I unhappy?" Some participants reported more tangible events that sparked the search for meaning. A few struggled to find employment in their field, some experienced relationship break-ups that shook their confidence, and a few encountered health problems that called their plans into question.

Regardless of the experiences that sparked dissatisfaction, participants recognized the need to analyze their circumstances and determine how to alter their lives to find what they called peace, happiness, balance, or a variety of other terms. In the course of this analysis, they realized that the source of meaning had to emerge from inside. For example, Kurt explained coming to understand that his dissatisfaction stemmed from basing his happiness on the approval of others. This awareness led him to conclude:

> For me balance is not a conscious thing; it just happens when I am following what feels right and what doesn't. If I go out to try to get balance, you can bet I won't get it. The act of consciously trying to do it eliminates the possibility of achieving it. I don't know why that is. For me, if I want balance, I have to be balanced. If I want peace, I have to be peace. If I go out and look for it, it is elusive – it's outside. I have stopped looking for it outside myself.

The realization that looking inside was necessary led my participants to embark on constructing and reconstructing themselves. Mark explained:

> Making yourself into something, not what other people say or not just kind of floating along in life, but you're in some sense a piece of clay. You've been formed into different things, but that doesn't mean you can't go back on the potter's wheel and instead of somebody else's hands building and molding you, you use your own, and in a fundamental sense change your values and beliefs.

Mark's reconstruction led him to a new understanding, which he described as:

> Stepping back from one's physical self into a perspective and in knowing that what you are seeing in the physical world is not the complete reality of your

> existence. It has nothing to do with religion, and everything to do with one's soul. It comes from getting closer to my own spirit – a part of me that knows me better than I consciously know myself. This is not a denial of responsibility for one's decisions; it is assuming one's responsibilities. I've found a truer identity that leads to understanding and informs important life decisions.

The search for meaning thus began with dissatisfaction with one's circumstances and a growing awareness that satisfaction would come from choosing circumstances consistent with one's own values and beliefs. This yielded a period of constructing or authoring one's own beliefs and values to establish the internal system for making meaning. Once this internal system prevailed over external expectations, participants engaged in the on-going process of solidifying it as the foundation for interpreting their lives and making life choices.

Participants enjoyed varying degrees of support for dealing with the tensions and dissonance that were arising in the early years after college. Some found encouragement for reflection and re-evaluation from their families and significant others who supported them in developing an internal meaning-making system. Some had supervisors or instructors who modeled internal meaning-making systems and who shared the processes through which they were developed. On occasion relatives offered books or other resources that helped participants recognize the need for an internal source for meaning making and notions on how to construct it. Sometimes participants found these notions in self-help books that attracted their attention because they resonated with their concerns. Others looked for solace and guidance in church affiliations or within their own sense of faith. Some sought professional counseling to aid in their search. Some participants were less fortunate, however, in finding resources and support for their questioning. They

reported that friends didn't view these issues as serious or that significant others downplayed the importance of these concerns. Some participants' parents criticized them for reconsidering career and personal goals. Some worked in settings where models were not positive and mechanisms for growth (e.g., learning decision-making processes, validation of one's ability) were minimal. These participants relied on their own internal resources to struggle with finding meaning.

These young adults' searches for meaning are best understood by listening to their evolution over time. Thus rather than include short excerpts from many stories, I recount two stories in depth to illustrate the overarching dynamics and complexities of the search and offer some sense of the variation participants experienced in developing internal systems for making meaning.

Arriving at a Crossroads: Realizing the Necessity of the Search for Meaning

As participants proceeded on the externally derived plans they made at the end of college, they encountered circumstances that brought them to a developmental crossroads. This crossroads marked the turning point from external to internal sources of meaning making. Kelly's experience illustrates this dynamic. She returned to her hometown upon graduation and accepted a teaching job. She was happy with the position and pleased to be able to return to her community. She even found the opportunity to translate what she had learned in teacher education to her teaching practice. She reported being somewhat insecure in her first year of teaching because her colleagues did not use the approaches she used, but after attending a conference she shared, "it was reassuring to find out that what I was doing was right." Kelly also began her masters' degree. She explained, "my parents have encouraged both my sister and I to educate ourselves to our

full potential and capabilities." Although she had some hesitations about it, she reported that "my parents' values won out." Her parents' insights and support were also important in deciding to end a romantic relationship. Kelly decided to exit the relationship because she felt she was losing herself by doing what her boyfriend wanted her to do. However, she found solace in her parents' views, saying, "My Dad said I'm too independent for my boyfriend. That made me really step back and think, because my Dad knows me and he knows how I am, how I work. It helped to have my parents' support and have them not saying that I made a horrible mistake." These comments indicate that Kelly relied heavily on external influences to make decisions in her professional and personal life.

A significant event at Kelly's school brought her to a crossroads and sparked her search for inner meaning. Lack of agreement between the board and the teachers led to a strike that placed Kelly in an awkward position. Growing up in the community, her family counted members of the board as friends. As a teacher she could understand the two competing views but also trusted the board to work out a fair solution. She described her disillusionment with the teachers as a result of the strike:

> It got in the way of those old memories – it took away the student-teacher relationship and it forced me to see them as adults and human beings with weaknesses and opinions that I might not necessarily agree with, personalities that I might not necessarily want to associate myself with. It just kind of stripped away the barrier that was between the teacher and the student. It was just really a shock to my system. … And then the teachers--there were rumors circulated about me that--because I--you know, when I expressed my views and some of them came back and said, "Kelly, you know, they think that all your ideas are just coming from your Mom's mouth." My old teachers didn't give me credit for being able to think on my own, which really pissed me off. I thought, "My gosh, here I am, I've been through college, I'm a successful teacher. I'm working hard. I'm living on my own. Give me a little credit here."

In addition to negating her memories, the strike also reduced her willingness to accept others' thoughts at face value. She explained:

> It's hard to put into words. I think my outlook's changed. I don't see everything black and white at all anymore. Nothing's black and white. I don't think I'm as naive as I was as far as trusting people. I've always been extremely trusting of people. And I consider myself able to judge people's personalities fairly well. And as a result I trusted my judgment. I was trod on a bit this past year, and although I still value my judgment, I'm not going to be as open as quick, I think, and involved in situations. So I would say it really--you know, it's made me realize the value of really thinking an issue through before you stand up and state your opinion. And maybe not because of what I said, but I still believe what I said was right, but things that I saw, you know, in the strike situation. You really need to look. I mean, there's a front and a back side to everything, and you've got to make sure you know what's going on. I don't think I can be as led as easily as maybe I could have before.

These realizations led her to relinquish the external formula for her life and to accept ambiguity. She elaborated:

> When I was in high school I thought "well, by the time I'm 24 or 25 I'll know it all; I'll have it all. It will all be straight. My life will be set." Well, of course, we know that's not true. So I've kind of accepted the fact that I don't know what's going on, just have to take it as it comes and do the best I can. I've accepted the fact that I'm never going to have it all straightened out. You just have to take each day, take each year and do the best you can and educate yourself and do the best you can in your work and in your life.

Kelly realized at this point that she needed to find meaning within herself. The vague "do the best you can" reveals that she has not yet constructed an internal source of meaning making to guide her life.

Evan was arriving at the same crossroads as Kelly, albeit through a very different route. Evan worked part-time during his last year of college at a real estate management company. His work resulted in an invitation to join the company fulltime upon graduation, which he did. He described the job as falling into his lap and felt he had no

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formal training for this line of work. Evan's approach to life was "push yourself as much as possible." Implementing this in his work led him to initial success and added responsibility. Evan also married in the initial years after college. He explained that it did not seem like a big deal to him but that it was important to his wife and grandparents. As a result, he said, "I had no objection." Evan acknowledged that he and his wife operated very differently but he assumed that this would work out. Evan was highly organized, describing his life as a "finely tuned machine, literally." He thought this organization would keep his life running smoothly.

Evan's work in leasing commercial real estate prompted some disillusionment. He explained:

> When you play with real estate, the effect you have on other people's lives is mind-boggling. If they are your tenant and you say "get out because you can't pay the rent." We're not like that, but I know other landowners that just throw them right out. Who knows? They could wind up homeless. What gives you the right to do these things just because it's your job?

Evan's concerns led him to not want children, a decision that would conflict with his wife's desires. He felt there were too many people in the world already and he did not want to add to it. Despite his disillusionment with the world around him, Evan proceeded on his plan to make the most of himself. It landed him in trouble, as he described a year later.

> I overworked myself last spring. You know how every spring I run this hockey league. I didn't realize I was getting into the state I was in and by June I had totally burned myself out. I walked around like a zombie and I was really depressed. I had worked on two really hard deals right before that, in addition to running that league. It took its toll without me really realizing it. I always thought I was superman and could handle it. I did handle it, but I paid the price. That put things in perspective for me. I was placing too much importance on things that I really shouldn't have. Now I take it easier than I did. The world doesn't rise or fall on how I come through at work. I'm not a superhero, so I still do my best, but

> if something doesn't go through, I'm not going to be crushed. ... I'm really glad it happened now because I've been able to do a lot of heavy thinking and just see what's important to me and what direction I want to take. One thing I did decide was that I really don't appreciate the industry that I'm in. Sure I make a lot of money, but if I could get into something that I would enjoy and I made less money, it wouldn't matter.

Evan was rethinking some aspects of his personal life at this point as well. He introduced this issue in talking about having been daring financially:

> This year our combined income will hit six figures. And we live from week to week. I was a little bit reckless, but I never was irresponsible. I was daring, – my philosophy on it was if you earn the money and you can't enjoy it and you get hit by a bus, then what's the point? So we really went to town. You know, my wife has terrible credit. She had a lot of problems before I straightened out everything. When she paid her last car payment, they sent their bill that she still owed $3,000. I knew this was coming because she didn't have insurance on her car for three years, so they bought insurance.

Because his wife had also, in his terms, "cooked the engine" on her car, he bought her a new one and in the midst of it all got involved in paying her debts. He found some surprises:

> I was shocked. I was a little bit pissed off too. I knew she had credit problems before I married her, but I didn't realize the extent of how irresponsible she was. That sent me reeling a little bit. But I've started cleaning that up so when the time comes I'm able to get a mortgage. I've seriously flipped back and forth like, "Do I want to get a mortgage with her? Maybe I should hang out and rent for a couple more years to see if things last." I hope so, but I don't really deal with it right now because I don't have to. ... I just--some days I'm like, "I wonder if I should have gotten married." just because of the way I feel sometimes. Sometimes I get in a mood like that. Not too often anymore. I guess it's just taken me a little longer to settle in than I thought. I must say we never get in fights, but I'm not jumping for joy all the time either, do you know what I'm saying? It is pretty difficult sometimes. Some of my friends want to be married. And I'm like, "Why?" That kind of sums it up right there. ... My wife almost got transferred. She didn't get the position, so it was a moot point. But it raised certain points. I was like, "If you get transferred to San Diego or Miami, let's go. But if you get transferred to Canada, take your skis and write me a note because I'm not going." That was another thing that we had to deal with this year.

These struggles led Evan to conclude that he was becoming more of his own person each year. He reflected on changes over the years:

> When the school year began each fall I would always realize, "Gee, last year, what a dork," you know. And I thought once you're out of school it really doesn't make a difference, but it's still like that year to year now. And I'm wondering if it ever does cease, if it ever does plateau. I become more defined year after year, become more of my own person. I'm a little bit wiser. I'm not a smart-ass, but I can find my way around a little bit better every year. I've become a little bit more organized every year, not that I'm not now, but I reorganize my goals all the time.

Even though he was reorganizing goals, Evan had given up on the formula. As a result of his experiences in work and personal life during this difficult year, he said:

> Nothing ever fits exactly the way you want. You have to compromise and adapt. I'm pretty patient now. I just will keep looking, and when I think the right opportunity comes along and things click, it will happen. I don't like to force things.

Evan, like Kelly, recognized that things are complicated and he had to take initiative to find the right opportunities. Like Kelly, his approach is vague due to the lack of an internal source of meaning making.

Constructing Internal Authority and Meaning

In their attempts to "do the best you can" and wait until "things click," the participants started to analyze aspects of their lives more intently. For Evan, at least initially, this meant a shift away from planning everything to going with the flow. What he thought was the right opportunity offered him a chance to explore his disillusionment with his work. He described what happened:

> I changed jobs. I needed to get out of the other place and grow a little bit. Later my old company begged me to come back, and eventually I did. They needed me because of merging with another company. Earlier this year, I and 4 people from my company were "sold" in the merger to another company in the city. Now I take the train every day. It is a wild ride. I'm getting settled in – I like it a lot. I was thrown into a brand new environment; Madison Avenue - playing with the

> big boys. It is not a new job, but tripled the responsibility for me. I didn't go unwillingly, but not by choice; I am in the river and that is where it flowed. I'm grateful for it, there are no problems, but I had feared it. It is a big pond. It amazes me at how big it is. If you think about it too often, it is overwhelming. I'm used to the suburbs, 5 minutes from the office, not wearing a suit. Now it is high theatrics. If you are going to advance, you have to go to the city.

Evan conveyed that he had changed his attitude and was letting go of keeping things perfect.

> More with personal stuff than with the job, I get the attitude that you do what you can. In the past I always tried to keep things perfect. It is a waste of time. Expect things to go wrong and you'll be better prepared. Things were going good for me –the power went to my head –I felt like I was in more control than I was. Now I'm at the attitude of screw it, but I'm not irresponsible.

Having given up his notions of keeping things perfect, Evan seemed to swing the opposite direction in going with the river he was in. As it turned out over the next couple of years, Evan began to formulate his own ideas of what was good for him and how he would shape his life. Talking about his work, he noted that he had come to accept it as who he was.

> The most important thing has been work for the last year and a half. I never thought of myself as living to work, but it has taken over; I've gotten way more serious about it. I focused on improving myself in the work place; this is my career now, like it or not; that's what I do. I've come to terms with it and accepted it. Fortunately for me, I have grown to like it because I've become good at it. I'm extremely lucky that I have had knowledgeable mentors who gave me responsibilities, afforded me the opportunity to learn and grow. I work hard, I'm dedicated to the venture I'm in whether I like it or not. People realize that. My liking this was a gradual thing; probably happened when I left the company I started with, and went into a situation where I was not challenged. I grew to really enjoy this when I was asked back to my company, made an officer, and allowed to become heavily involved. I realized I had learned a lot, proven that I can function in this environment. That gave me confidence to do well – I look forward to going to work. It is less of a chore and more my life. It has become what I am. I was uncertain I wanted to stay in this. If you don't like what you do, you have to stop and start over. I went through that, right before I decided this was fine. When you have a future in it, things get more comfortable, I feel better about it. I've been successful.

Analyzing the meaning of his work and experiencing an alternative helped Evan to value his work. Evan found involvement meaningful. Doing his best and doing things his way were important components of his satisfaction. He described doing things his way under less than ideal circumstances:

> When my company merged with this company, they planned to ditch me at the earliest opportunity. They never gave me a hard time, but all they were interested in was getting the assets of my old company into theirs. I dug my heels in and rolled up my sleeves down there. Now, the whole staff that worked on properties was reduced to me. I am organized to a point that is maniacal - which they like. I got a raise, they saw how I did this; they gave me more properties. The company has continued to grow; for right now I still have much to learn. I like to learn hard things. It is beyond my control but in a way I'm comfortable with it. I am given the time and space to learn on my own without being forced to do it one way or another. I've done it my own way. I've made lots of mistakes, not too often, but a couple; learn not to do it again. I obsess about it until I solve it; or adjust that this is the situation now and I can't change it.

Evan's passion for learning, and his dedication to being able to describe it to me each year, led him to a better understanding of how his mind worked.

> I told you about this feeling that I had once I became "aware." That is the best word that I can use to describe the difference between how I view my intellectual level now, versus how I felt prior to "noticing" my surroundings and my relationship with the world around me. It was like I woke up one day and things just clicked in my brain and things became clear to me for the first time. The most dramatic difference between before and after was my ability to think, and the subsequent confidence in my abilities and trust in my decisions. I have developed my own approach to solving problems, one which has proven to me to be a good one, and one which has proven to be a good teacher. When it becomes apparent to me that I have relied on this ability, I often try to remember what I did before I began to understand how my mind worked.

Evan's comments illustrate his shift to internal meaning making, or self-authorship. He was able to articulate to himself, and to me, the details of how his mind worked to solve problems. In doing so, it was apparent that his own voice was at the center of every step in the process:

> I clear everything away from my eyesight to focus on the issue; this allows me to jump in and roll around in it. I take pieces of information, move them around, change them; break them down, group them together by similarity. I like to figure out what the problem is, state it to myself. Problems are more overwhelming in your head than on paper. Sometimes I have to put it off for a day. Sleep on it. Regardless of outside influences, I have to do it my way. Once I can establish what it is, I determine what I have to do to correct that. Then figure out a way to get from A to B and who the players are in that, what role they have. I'll orchestrate solving the problem by using people and tools I have available, using the least amount of time and money.

In addition to being more aware of how his mind worked, Evan was increasingly aware of his sense of his own identity, as is evident in these comments:

> As my personality and sense of self have really begun to develop and become more refined, my ability to direct my life accordingly has become increasingly confident. As I realize who I am, and what is important to me, it becomes easier for me to establish my priorities. For example, it was a priority for me to purchase a house and become part of a community. It is not a priority for me to have children, at least for now, although I doubt this will change in the near future. Identifying and arranging my priorities has helped me to develop a "road map" for reaching short and long-term goals. Don't get me wrong, I am not trying to predict the future and I by no means know exactly what I want, but I have developed a general idea and use my knowledge as a guide.

Along with this refining of who he was, Evan was redefining relationships with others.

> I find that I am constantly rebalancing my identity in relationship to others. With my parents' divorce two years ago, and the purchase of my home, I am becoming a central figure in the extended family and have left behind my "youth" oriented identity. At work, my identity continues to grow almost as fast as my personal identity. I am 28, which is 17 years younger than the next youngest officer in my company. Since I began with the current crew 2 1/2 years ago, I have been titled Asset Manager, Senior Asset Manager, Assistant Vice President, and now Vice President. My identity within the group has changed very much. I owe this to my abilities in being aware of how my mind works and dealing with my personal set of realities.

Evan's own personal set of realities, and his attention to analyzing how to deal with them, led him to develop an internal meaning-making system that guided every aspect of his life – his work, his identity, and his relationships with others. He does not indicate that he

has found meaning in its final form, only that he has found a process for making meaning internally that he can use in redefining his future and the various dimensions of his life as they evolve.

Kelly was also paying attention to the ways her mind worked as a central part of her search for internal meaning. She found the opportunity to explore this in graduate school:

> It means a lot to me that I'm hearing that other teachers are experiencing the same things I am. And also hearing the way other teachers do things. I don't think I got that much in my undergraduate classes because a lot of it was just content. I was just taking down everything I could get and hoping that I could use it some day. The biggest thing now is all the workings of my mind whenever I hear something, I've got something concrete to link it back to in my classroom. It makes it more meaningful; it makes it, I guess, tangible. And it makes it important to me. Finding common ground and being able to apply it. Then we can take the theory or strategy and take it back to our own respective situations. ... That's why my Master's work has been so much more beneficial to me. In almost every class the professors have valued our opinions and they've taken our experiences and amalgamated them into the curriculum of the course.

Connecting what she was learning to her own experience and deciding what to do with it led Kelly to feel more secure as a professional and as an adult. She explained:

> I'm more secure professionally, as a teacher. I've very secure in my knowledge. I'm more secure when I talk to parents that I know what I know. I think I know more than a lot of other teachers who aren't working on their Master's or don't have it. I can back up what I say to the parents with theories and "This is why your child is this way," and "This is what I read in the research." I feel like that gives me a little more credibility rather than just telling them, "This is the way it is." Every year I get more secure as a person, as an adult, more confident in just living as an adult.

Kelly also had an opportunity to prove herself at work, both to herself and to others:

> I'm proving myself. This past year we participated in a scientific literacy grant. We were chosen as a target school. We have a lead teacher go with the principal to meetings every month and learn about new science procedures, hands-on

> science, assessment. And I was chosen to be the lead teacher from our school. I brought information back to teachers in three grade levels. And what ended up happening is we chose a whole new science curriculum, 1 to 8, so I was a big part of that committee in choosing a new curriculum for the whole school into high school. That was a good thing because I had to lead the meetings with the other grade-level teachers, and I also helped the principal with some in-service meetings. They could see that I was knowledgeable about this. I think it's helped them see me in a professional sense.

Kelly was seeing herself as knowledgeable and this was reinforced by her opportunity to exhibit her professionalism to her colleagues. Kelly's sense of herself as a knowledgeable professional and as an adult also led to a transformation in her relationship with her family:

> Family's become a lot more important to me over the last few years than it was before I left for college. I think my relationship with my family is on a totally different level now that it even was in college. Like with my aunt, I feel that she's more of a sister to me now, even though she's in her mid-forties, than an aunt because we've just got a really open relationship. The same thing with my Mom, although it's not on the sister level. She respects me as an adult, and she respects my life. She and my Dad are very careful; they don't come over unless they call first or they are invited. They respect my privacy in my apartment. They're very respectful of my adult life.

Another dynamic of Kelly's construction of inner meaning was the increased role of faith in her life:

> Church has become larger part of my life, both physical and mental. A big change in faith over the past two years. My eyes have been opened up a lot. I was raised in a Presbyterian home, with Christian values. For 3 or 4 years after college, I was just going through the motions. I had a conversation with a guy; we started talking about faith. I couldn't talk about it out loud – I hadn't talked about my beliefs out loud. My family believes you don't talk about it, you live it. I needed to experience that. He talked freely. I was shocked. I started listening to Christian radio – I was curious about it. Listening to Christian singers every day really connected me. I think about it every single day. I started reading more things, talking to people that would help me through it. I read the Bible; everything started falling into place. Everything has happened sequentially; everything happened and I could handle it. I wouldn't have known how earlier. I

> talked to a friend about it; she said it seemed to be a series of answered prayers for me. I learned a lot about myself and where faith belongs in my life. I'm more comfortable, centered. It is neat. My aunt has been a catalyst: supportive, very open. ... Right after I talked with the guy that got me thinking, I had a scary couple of months – I started doubting my faith. It was a scary feeling after growing up believing Jesus is the Son of God etc. – too huge, I couldn't fit it together. I picked up my Bible; I had never just read it. I read a little before bed at night to see what would happen. It took less than a week; I had my head screwed on straight – this is the way it is. It is powerful. The more I read, the less I know. I am amazed at how little I know about what is in there. I talk to people, find out how knowledgeable they are and that makes me thirsty, want to know more. It has been a significant experience.

Kelly's finding meaning through her evolving faith, her increased confidence in her work, and her understanding of how her mind worked, all combined to help her make meaning of herself and her adult life. Whereas Evan's awareness of how his mind works guides his meaning making, Kelly's faith guides hers. They both illustrate what the majority of participants were experiencing in their late 20s – having found a process for internal meaning.

Solidifying Internal Meaning-Making: Coming Home

As participants worked to solidify and strengthen their ways of making meaning, they became simultaneously more flexible and more grounded. Kelly continued to place her faith at the center of how she made meaning. She shared:

> My faith is the most important thing in my life, the center of everything. It has made me more patient and understanding, slower to be accusatory, slower to judge. I am quicker to find out why. Those characteristics affect every aspect of my life. I am more at peace, know who I am more now. I feel like every year I come more into myself. I thought I'd have it all together by now! Every year, I wonder if I'll ever figure it out. When I master something, something else crops up. Faith is at the center and belongs there.

Kelly's faith helped her deal with a situation in which she felt betrayed. She bought a house from a couple her family knew and shortly after moving in discovered that it

needed a new roof. She was angry that this had not been disclosed to her. Yet she was determined to do what she felt was right in the situation. She explained:

> I have a better self-image than I have ever had in life. People are going to have their perceptions, but I have to be firm in my convictions and do what I know is right. My family philosophy is don't do something halfway; do it right. I found out not everyone is like that. I have to be flexible. I held a grudge against this couple who owned the house until 2 weeks ago. She is a good friend of my aunt who I am close to. I felt like they misrepresented themselves; they knew how bad the roof was. But society today is too sue happy; I'm not going to do it. Take what life gives you and take it as learning experience. The owners are nice Christian people, their opinion of quality work is not mine. I can't hold that against them. The town is to too small so I'm going to let it go. When I was on the Deacon's board, I learned that people perceive actions all different ways and react in all different ways. I might not always understand why they are doing something but I'm in a responsibility position, have to deal with it, come to a solution or conclusion. Have to be flexible. Being a kindergarten teacher has really helped me be flexible! You can't work with small kids and not be willing to shift the lesson. It really hasn't shaken my self-image at all.

Kelly elaborated on being comfortable with who she is, saying:

> My values are the same, but I think every year I get more of a sense of self-worth. It has been a struggle, in high school I was extremely shy. Through four years at college I experimented with a lot I shouldn't have, it continued after college. Through all that I found out who I was and was not. It culminated in me turning the corner with my faith. I am extremely comfortable with who I am – not as worried about what people think of me as of what I think of myself – an important realization. Faith was a significant event in knowing myself. It created a comfort zone and a sense of purpose, from there everything else fell into place around that. The puzzle is not done, but the pieces are falling into place. The puzzle won't ever be done. All different situations can cause a person to turn a corner.

Kelly acknowledged that being comfortable with herself and centered around her faith did not mean there were no struggles. She struggled to deal with the betrayal she perceived and the feelings it sparked for her:

> I am still dealing with the betrayal part – to let go of the burning anger. I just had to simmer on it for awhile – the longer time went by, I was seeing this as not a positive part of my life. I am definitely a person who says the glass is half full

> rather than half empty. It was bringing me down – nothing constructive was coming from this anger. Once I decided not to use justice system, I just thought, "I've got to figure out a way to let things go." I read the Bible a lot about forgiveness, turning other cheek; turned to that as an example to help me. See the words, try to say the words, it is easier to say the words than to feel it! Easy to say forgive and forget – I'm still dealing with forgetting. I prayed about it, try to be positive toward her, but it is still stilted. I don't want to say I hold grudges, but I think I am! It is hard for me to deal with that side of my personality, especially when I feel I've been wronged. I had to deal with that – don't want to be that way if I have a choice. I try to teach myself, force myself to not think this way; yet these little nasty thoughts just keep coming inside!

Kelly continued to explore these issues, saying that there was always room to grow:

> I will never be satisfied, there is something more out there – I am not through growing and learning. I've not reached my capacity at all – I hope I still feel like this when I'm 60. The world is an infinite source of knowledge, experience. I'm having a great time watching my parents – they are 3 years from retirement. They want to take a boat up the Amazon River. It is neat to see how they want to expand their world, expand their knowledge. There is so much out there. Life is a journey. Some of the big hurdles have been achieved. I am learning who I am and what I want to be with myself. Part of me is kind of upset at not having family yet, part of me is thankful that I've had this time.

Kelly's comfort with herself not only allowed her to continue to explore, but to understand her strengths and weaknesses more clearly:

> I see myself as more of a realist regarding who I am and my strengths and weaknesses than I did two years ago. I always want to think of myself as being the best. I think I'm becoming better at dealing with weaknesses – learning how to overcome those more than I used to. Rather than seeing self as all positive, I'm seeing myself as a good person, but I still need to work on things. I never dealt with that as much; I was quicker to put weaknesses on others. This shift is due to issues I'm dealing with now – being a homeowner, my experience as a teacher – they are a lot more – what is the word I am searching for? Bigger issues than where do we go on Friday night. Decisions I'm making these days are much more serious and life changing than they were 5 years ago.

Encountering the difficult realities of life, and needing to face them as a responsible person, helped Kelly continue to strengthen the foundation of her inner meaning making.

The stronger her sense of faith and herself became, the more open she remained to learning more and analyzing herself more closely. The solid sense of self that came from internal meaning making left her secure to face the uncertainty, disappointment, and complexity of adult life.

Uncertainty, disappointment and complexity marked Evan's life as he neared his 30s as well. Like Kelly, he became increasingly comfortable with himself yet more open to continued learning. However, Evan solidified his internal meaning making more through self-analysis than through the phenomenon of faith. His foundation helped him deal with issues in his personal and work life. For example, on the topic of the ever-present differences between he and his wife, he said:

> I find comfort in organizing things. My wife is the complete opposite. I'm at my wits end with her sometimes because of her habits around the house. Everything I own, I know where it is at all times. Her car is a disgrace - it is an extension of her closet; my stuff is in my trunk in an Eddie Bauer bag in compartments. Every once in awhile it comes to a head; never gets resolved. Then other stuff occurs and you stop focusing on it. I've learned that criticism doesn't help; I don't worry about it; we have our own rooms where we can go where the other isn't forbidden, but we keep our stuff there and respect that. That's one way of dealing with it. It is not easy to be married. There's no way to describe how I handle it; I do what is most right or convenient at the moment. I haven't focused on it. Whatever happens, happens.

Evan's solid sense of self allowed him to comfortably accept various aspects of his life and organize them in ways that were workable to him, yet remain open to change. After three years of working in the city, work had lost its hold on his life even though it was still important. He elaborated:

> My work role doesn't define me. I take the train in everyday, for 3 years now. Taking the train is a physical separation between work and personal life. I transform from one thing to the other; two separate lives. The train ride is 30 minutes - I sleep through some of it. I wake up a different person, transformed, my game face on, uniform, do what you gotta do. When done, go back on the

> train, reverse transformation and I'm out. I don't give it another thought. I never dream about work, never discuss it with my wife. I've come to enjoy the activities that define life as how I like to view it. I like work; I would keep working if I won the lottery. I like coming in and being involved. I shut it off, go do my thing. I still play hockey every week - as I've done for 27 years!

Evan was more open than ever to learning new things, as he described in his work:

> I thought I was doing well last year, but I look back, and realize I knew so little. It continues that way each year, I'm glad, it is humbling. My dad used to tell me when I was a kid, there is always somebody bigger than you that will kick your butt. I keep that in mind. I try to improve what I already know, so I can move on to the next level. At the same time keeping prior responsibility, taking it with me, adding, building onto that.

Evan had become accustomed to change and expected it.

> Now we just kind of accept these things; nothing ever stays the same. If you expect it, it is easier. A lot of things I am incredibly inflexible about. As far as other people and other things, I don't try to control. I've gradually gotten that way. The only way is to experience this and to see what happens when you don't take that route. The experience you accumulate can be painful but necessary. It adds to your repertoire of being able to deal with things in the future; been through it, lived, know what is coming next. It is less frightening, less mysterious.

Certainly knowing what is coming next helps deal with things, but Evan's foundation within himself helped him remain comfortable during the major changes in his life. One was a tragic event involving his father that he mentioned for the first time in our twelfth interview, although it probably had been a central part of his earlier shift to expecting things to go wrong. He explained:

> My dad is still in jail; I visit him once a month. The trial was two years ago. At first it was a real drag; it costs me $300 a month to support him. That stinks; I'm really the only one that takes care of his business. My brother moved away and doesn't participate in it. Luckily I make enough money that it doesn't affect me. He is appealing, so it will probably be a couple more years. I am not gonna fund his appeal; I'll support him in other ways. I buy his cigarettes, but I told him I won't throw money away on attorneys. I don't want to be in control of that. Non productive for me to be over involved. My parents divorced before that, so mom doesn't have to deal with it.

The other was a more positive change, although one Evan had said all along he did not want – a baby. In sharing how this came about, he said:

> It was not planned! If I had to plan it, it never would have happened! It's giving in a little bit to growing up; there's no going back after that! I take it seriously – once you are locked into something like that, that's it. I'm enjoying it. It took me a little bit of time to accept that this was happening – however right or wrong that may sound. Once I was able to come to terms with that, it really didn't affect my thinking that much – I already had a whole bunch of mouths to feed, so it was not that much of an adjustment. It was a matter of time for just realizing there is no getting out of this. Eventually, in back of my head, I guess, it was exciting. It was something that really frightened me for a long time – I don't know why. It is such a serious thing – being responsible for somebody forever. It was different than getting married, if that was not right, you could get out of it if push came to shove. Only a semi-permanent thing, realistically. Once this went into effect, you can't undo it. Once a child is born, you are attached to another person through the child. Permanence, responsibility, always played a part in my willingness to go through with it. I knew if my wife didn't just force me, I would never do it. I needed that shove. She just did it – I don't ask, I don't even want to know!

I asked Evan at this point how his differences with his wife were playing out. That too seemed more settled.

> We still have a lot of differences. Yes, it used to cause a lot of problems, but now it doesn't. We came close to calling it quits a couple times, but not that close. She does her part; works hard. I don't know too many other people who would put up with hockey and my family. I am not the easiest person to live with. We do our own things and don't get worked up about it.

Evan was comfortable with his life circumstances, with himself, and with his never-ending capacity to keep growing.

> When you're a kid, you think you are developed but you aren't. At this age you realize you aren't. Experience level helps you to become comfortable with yourself– realize you have lived through certain events and either have taken it on the chin or given in, but you're still here and still going. You realize you can live through certain things. When Kristy was having the baby, she dilated to 10 centimeters before taking pain medication – she was freaking out! I was like, I know you are in a lot of pain and this sounds schmucky, but lots of people live through this. I open my mind to learn; you never know what is coming down. I

> call it floating on the waves. I kind of imagine myself in the water, a Cancerian thing to do, going with the direction of the ocean, going up and down with the waves. Knowing that there are times at the top, other times the waves are above your head. I don't try to control it; it is impossible. Taking that into account allows me to relax and deal with things. You can't control things that happen to you, but there is no reason why I shouldn't control what I can. I'm not ashamed to organize. Why shouldn't your house look the way you want it?

Evan had learned what he could control (and still delighted in organizing those portions of his life!) and how to make meaning of what he could not control. His internal meaning-making system helped him make sense of even the most difficult of circumstances. These internal meaning making systems helped participants face the on-going change and complexities they faced as young adults.

Creating Educational Contexts for Internal Meaning-Making

Kelly, Evan and their peers in the longitudinal study took on serious adult responsibilities when they left college. These responsibilities brought them into interaction with people whose values and experiences differed from theirs. Working through these situations, handling them responsibly, and deciding how to lead their personal and professional lives in the face of these discoveries required serious self-reflection and exploration. These participants had already succeeded in college and in acquiring responsible societal roles. Yet they had not been sufficiently challenged during college to develop internal foundations for making meaning of themselves, their relationships with others, and the world around them.

The mission of higher education includes preparing graduates for leadership roles, for participation in a democratic society, and for lifelong learning required by our fast-changing society. Traditional society, which used to guide people regarding what to

believe and how to function, has been replaced with a postmodern society in which people must make those decisions for themselves in the face of plurality. Perspectives on leadership in this postmodern context note that leaders engage in mutual dialogue and meaning-making with their constituents (Rost, 1991) that all parties must function in the face of uncertainty, rapid change and unpredictability (Zohar, 1997). Organizations using these forms of leadership do not make meaning for their employees; instead the employees make meaning for themselves and collectively for the organization. Citizenship in a multicultural society requires similar expectations. Tierney (1993) captures one significant dimension of this expectation in his call for cultural citizenship in which we continually engage in construction and reformulation of our identities via interaction with diverse others in order to achieve a society which honors difference. Lifelong learning requires continual construction and reformulation of our beliefs as we critically analyze new information. Critical thinking, one of the hallmarks of an educated person, requires the ability to make judgments based on an analysis of the evidence, taking multiple perspectives into account while not being unduly influenced by others' beliefs. These kinds of expectations require that we do more in college to prepare young adults to develop internal sources of meaning making.

Kegan (1994) likens the shift from traditional to postmodern expectations to learning to drive a standard transmission automobile when sufficient numbers of automatic transmission cars are no longer available. Traditional society allowed adults to drive comfortably while societal institutions – churches, schools, government, and family – shifted the gears. Now that the automatic shifting is no longer consistently done by societal institutions, adults need to learn to shift the gears themselves. Making meaning

must shift from reliance on external sources to reliance on an internal system. In order to fulfill its mission, higher education must provide a context in which students can develop internal meaning-making systems. Waiting for this process to occur in the years after college does little to prepare graduates for the complexities and responsibilities they face. My longitudinal participants' stories suggest that the search for internal meaning was aided by a number of factors, including: experiencing the consequences of externally influenced decisions, recognizing the need for a personal strategy for making meaning, engaging in open conversation with others in adult-to-adult relationships, and intentionally analyzing one's experiences to determine how to make sense of them.

Creating college contexts to promote internal meaning making begins with adopting the creation of internal meaning-making systems as an educational aim. Most colleges already advance critical thinking, leadership, and citizenship as educational aims but fail to directly convey to students that these require an internal system of making meaning that is influenced by external forces. Directly stating this as an expected outcome is the first step in engaging students actively in this process. The college environment – curricular and cocurricular – must then be organized such that students can learn the process of making meaning internally. This requires a fundamental transformation in how higher education has traditionally functioned, in how many educators conceptualize their role, and in how students perceive their role.

The implications of the longitudinal participants' stories are more complex than they first appear. At first glance, we could glean that replacing hierarchical relations with heterarchical relations, as happened for Kelly with her aunt and her graduate school instructors or for Evan with his supervisors and his family, would help young adults

engage in the open dialogue they need to explore how to construct internal meaning-making. Similarly, it is obvious that encountering experiences that create tension and dissonance are necessary to see the need for internal meaning making. Providing resources and support for intentionally analyzing one's experience naturally follow. Yet these prescriptive statements are not sufficient to create the conditions for transformation of the college environment or students' meaning making.

Although higher education institutions expect this outcome and lament its absence, most are not organized in ways that encourage or actively promote it. Concern about transmitting knowledge to students, avoiding difficulties arising from unwise student behavior, and having a smoothly running campus all lead to a traditional campus in which the gears are shifted by those external to students. Faculties decide what students should know and believe in particular disciplines and students who acquire and adopt these perspectives are rewarded with good grades. Even when faculty do invite students to think for themselves, students often miss these opportunities because most educational practice has led them to expect knowledge to be given to them. Faculty often abandon this pedagogy when internal thinking is not quickly forthcoming, hesitating to spend more time on the process of learning than on the particular subject matter for which they are responsible, unsure whether both can be accomplished simultaneously. Student affairs professionals' concern about a safe and civil campus community often leads them to focus more on prescribing and monitoring student behavior than on teaching students how to become productive campus citizens. Public relations often mediate campus administrators' struggle with the tension between creating a campus that is a learning experience versus one that operates smoothly.

To genuinely create the conditions my participants encountered after college, educators must believe that students are capable of constructing internal meaning-making systems and that educators are responsible for creating the conditions through which they learn to do so. At a recent faculty meeting a few of my colleagues interpreted their role as being responsible for students' learning. Hidden in this notion is the belief that students are not capable of making good choices about their learning. This is the traditional, hierarchical power structure that conveys to students that they are not capable or expected to make meaning themselves. Similarly, I have heard student affairs professionals often say it is their responsibility to insure safety and civility in the community rather than holding students accountable for these conditions. Granted some gear shifting needs to be done while students are learning to drive themselves. Basic knowledge must be studied; basic rules must exist to govern community living. Yet practice is necessary, and the campus is a safer place for exploration, risks, mistakes, and growth than is life after college. The messy nature of learning the process must be acknowledged and accepted as part of what campus practice is about. Contemporary perspectives about constructivist teaching, postmodern leadership, and student development all consistently argue for genuine dialogue with students as capable of learning, leadership and internal meaning making. Higher education must explore the transformation these perspectives – and my longitudinal participants' experience – emphasize as crucial for adults to meet the expectations higher education and society hold for them.

Mode of Inquiry

I used a constructivist perspective from the start of the longitudinal project because I view the dimensions of development as constructed by individuals making meaning of their experience. Perry (1970) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) emphasized their theories as possible windows through which to understand epistemological development, rather than the objective truth. Thus although I used their theories to inform the college interview, I employed an open-ended interview and an inductive analysis to allow new possibilities to emerge from the context. In sharing the findings of the college phase (Baxter Magolda, 1992), I emphasized them as possibilities stemming from a particular context, useful in other contexts depending on the reader's judgment of transferability. I continued this constructivist approach in the postcollege phase to continue to allow participants' constructions of their experience to emerge. Because this paper synthesizes data from the postcollege phase, I will concentrate here on postcollege methods, highlighting college phase methods as necessary. Portions of the description that follows have been previously published due to the longitudinal nature of the project.

Participants

The 39 persons upon whom this paper is based are participants in a 13-year longitudinal study that began in 1986 when they entered college. Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, a description of the participants as college students frames the context of the postcollege (Phase 2) findings. The study began with 101 traditional age students (51women and 50 men) who attended Miami University of Ohio, a state institution with a liberal arts focus. Admission is competitive and the entering class of which the study

participants were a part had a mean ACT score of 25.8, and 70% ranked in the top 20% of their high school class. Their majors included all six divisions within the institution, and cocurricular involvement in college was high. Of the 70 participants continuing in Phase 2 of the study, 59 graduated within 4 years and the remaining 11 in 5 years. Twenty-one of the Phase 2 participants pursued additional academic preparation after college graduation including law school, seminary, medical school, and various graduate degrees. Their occupations included business, education, social service, ministry, and government work. During the years after college, 7 participants withdrew; others were lost due to address changes or inability to schedule interviews after repeated attempts. Seventy participated in the 5th year. The most substantial drop occurred between the 5th and 6th year with only 51 participating year 6. Participation remained fairly stable in years 7 (48), 8 (42), 9 (41), and 10 through 12 (39).

Of the 39 participants who continued through year 12, 30 were married, 2 were divorced, and 15 had children. Seventeen had been or were pursuing advanced education: 12 had received master's degrees in education, psychology, social work, business administration, and economics. One had completed seminary, 2 received law degrees, and 1 was in medical school. One was taking undergraduate teacher education courses; another was pursuing a doctorate. The most prevalent occupations of these 39 participants were business (16) and education (9). Areas within business included sales in varied industries, financial work, public services, real estate, and marketing. The educators were all secondary school teachers. The remaining participants were in social work, law, homemaking, and the Christian ministry.

One dynamic of this context is the small number of students from underrepresented groups on the campus. Only 3 of the original 101 participants were members of underrepresented groups, two of whom continued into Phase 2. Although none of these 3 withdrew from the study, all were unreachable by Year 10 due to changing addresses. This paper offers a vision of adult identities based on the 39 participants described above. This vision is offered as a possibility, and is not assumed to fit for any young adults outside of this context. Transferability to other students and contexts is left to the judgment of the reader, as is customary in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 1990).

Interviews and Interpretation

The qualitative nature of the college interviews was continued during phase 2 to allow participants' stories to be the primary focus. Phase 2 interviews are best characterized as informal conversational interviews (Patton, 1990). Because few researchers have explored development after college via a longitudinal approach, it was particularly important for the method to allow insights to emerge from the participants' experiences. The annual interview began with a summary of the focus of Phase 2 of the project, that being to continue to explore how participants learn and come to know. The participant was then asked to think about important learning experiences that took place since the previous interview. The participant volunteered those experiences, described them, and described their impact on her or his thinking. I asked questions to pursue why these experiences were important, factors that influenced the experiences, and how the learner was affected. Each year, I noted participants' reactions to the conversation to routinely enhance the interview process. By Year 9, the interview became more informal to stay

consistent with participants' views on what was most effective in accessing their thinking. After the introduction, I then asked what life had been like for them since we talked last. These conversations included discussion of the dimensions of life they felt were most relevant, the demands of adult life they were experiencing, how they made meaning of these dimensions and demands, their sense of themselves, and how they decided what to believe. Interviews were conducted by telephone and ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. A sabbatical during Year 12 allowed me to visit 10 participants for face-to-face interviews in their homes.

Interview responses were analyzed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). Transcriptions of the taped interviews were reviewed and divided into units. The units were then sorted into categories to allow themes and patterns to emerge from the data. Credibility of the themes and patterns is addressed through prolonged engagement to build trust and understanding and member checking to assure accuracy of interpretations. Although this process took place annually, I revisited the data to explore adult identities during the 20s age range. Two research partners joined me to reread and analyze the postcollege data. We read 1 year at a time using the constant comparative method. Each prepared summaries of themes individually followed by meetings in which we discussed and synthesized our perceptions. This use of multiple analysts helped check subjectivities and increase the accuracy of our interpretations.

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